

Haste won't advance the PUSD cause

BY TOM CARTWRIGHT, PETER DREIER,
IRMA GONZALEZ, BOB HARRISON, TRACY
MIKURIYA, DAWN O'KEEFFE,
AND MARGE WYATT

THE Pasadena City Council has recently been talking about changing the way voters in Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre elect their seven-member PUSD school board. The City Council wants to make a decision by mid-August and put a proposal before the voters in November that would be in place for the school board election next March. This timetable barely leaves any opportunity for public input, much less voter education.

It is always good to think about ways to improve our democracy and our government, but such matters should be done thoughtfully, not hastily, as our Founding Fathers understood. Before the City Council makes any decision about changing the rules by which we elect our representatives — including those who run our school system — they should make sure that people have an opportunity to debate and understand the pros and cons of different approaches.

We welcome the City Council's concern for improving the schools. But a change in how we elect the school board may or may not give parents and others a stronger voice in school affairs. It may or may not improve the way PUSD educates our children. More parent involvement, better teacher training, smaller class sizes, more funding and other factors may be more important, as the City Council heard at its joint meeting with the school board June 5. So let's make sure that we know what we're trying to "fix" before going to the trouble and expense of changing the rules. Currently, we elect three people to the school board one year and four people two years later. Each seat is numbered, and candidates decide which numbered seat to run for. All voters can vote for candidates for all seats. If three candidates run for the same seat and none get a

GUEST VIEW

majority, the top two vote-getters compete in a run-off six weeks later. The current system requires that winning candidates receive the support from a majority of voters, something which appeals to many people.

One alternative proposal now under discussion, to abandon the current numbered seats system in favor of at-large plurality elections, is a huge mistake. In plurality elections, candidates with the most votes win.

This allows candidates to get elected with a very small fraction of the overall vote, rather than requiring majority (or even close to majority) support. For example, if 12 people run for three seats, all three winners could get elected to the school board with less than 10 percent of the vote. These could be candidates with a very small but well-organized constituency, especially candidates with a lot of money to reach a small targeted group.

If the goal is to hold the school board accountable to the public, this is hardly the answer.

Another proposal under discussion is to move to geographic district elections, like the City Council. But in PUSD, which is spread over Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre, schools are located unevenly across the district. Some school board members might have just one school in their districts, while others could have many.

Moreover, almost half of all PUSD families send their kids to schools located in different neighborhoods from where they live. Who "represents" you if you live in Bungalow Heaven but send your kids to Blair? Or if you live in Altadena and send your kids to McKinley? It would be extremely difficult to organize a constituency to have influence on a school board member, because the parents at Blair (and McKinley) would be spread all over, and

the residents of Bungalow Heaven (and Altadena) would have kids in schools all over the district.

In addition, voters without children, or without children in PUSD, have a stake in improving the school system as a whole, but not based on where they live or which schools happen to be in their neighborhood.

Our current system of electing PUSD school board members may or may not have flaws, but the two alternatives being floated — at-large elections where the winner just needs a plurality; and district-based elections — are not an improvement.

Rather than rushing a new proposal to the ballot, the City Council should create a task force of citizens to review the pros and cons of different approaches.

Before the City Council decides what proposal to put before voters, there should be opportunities for public input and education, including a series of informational forums. We have to consider the costs, the technology (different systems require different kinds of voting machines and software), the time needed for implementation and, most important, which system enhances the values we cherish. These might include increasing voter participation, guaranteeing that each school board member represents more than a narrow constituency, and making sure that the school board members represent the diversity of our three communities.

We certainly are not ready to have the Pasadena City Council agree on a proposal in August, that would go before the voters in November, for a school board election in March. The system used to elect school board members deserves thoughtful study. Our schools and our kids are too important.

Tom Cartwright, Peter Dreier, Bob Harrison, Tracy Mikuriya and Dawn O'Keeffe are parents of children in PUSD schools. Irma Gonzalez has taught in PUSD schools for 25 years. Marge Wyatt, former president of the Pasadena school board, has three children who graduated from PUSD schools.